

USC Center for AI in Society

Vision Statement

Artificial intelligence and social work: Collaborating with communities for a more just, healthy, and sustainable world.

The USC Center for AI in Society, a joint venture between the USC Viterbi School of Engineering and the USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work, launched in September 2016 as one of the first – if not the first – and only center that is equal parts computer science and social work. The mission of the center is to advance research in both artificial intelligence and social work through unique interdisciplinary partnerships. In addition, we see community collaborations with non-profit, government, and non-governmental organizations as central to our work.

This is not research for the benefit of academic publications. This is research that targets real-world impact.

Much of our work is oriented toward developing technology to enhance social service and health care interventions for persons who are living in impoverished or marginalized communities. Examples of this innovative approach include utilizing AI to enhance HIV prevention for homeless youth, suicide prevention for young adults, substance abuse treatment for young adults, and housing allocation for homeless individuals.

The culture of our center is unique to both computer science and social work. Using AI, we can add to the social service toolset. We do not seek out problems that are easy to solve. Rather, we seek to solve problems that are “wicked,” such as homelessness, suicide, and wildlife exploitation. In the process of engaging in the work, we *always* look for community-level collaborators, be they government or non-governmental entities. We embed ourselves, as researchers, in the context of these problems. We work *with* our community collaborators to define the research agenda. It is crucial to understand what are the most salient problems to their work in which our technological tools can act as a novel solution or as a force-multiplier to their ongoing work.

We do not replace humans; we enhance their capacities.

We believe that this work must leave the lab and be implemented and tested in the real world where it can make a difference. A unique part of our approach is a commitment to engaging in a feedback loop of testing and developing until we have created useful, impactful tools that can be used in the world. This approach is demonstrated through our projects and the partners who play an integral part. The foundational project for our center would not have been possible without the involvement and support of three local drop-in centers for homeless young people: My Friend's Place, Safe Place for Youth, and Youth Center on Highland.

We see this approach to work as one that could grow beyond our center into a new scientific area or even a new discipline. We believe AI work that can have societal impact must come from collaborations that include computer scientists, operations researchers, social scientists, and community partners. This kind of coordination is unique in the world, but our work shows the incredible promise and impact such work can have.

If the great social challenges of our time, such as homelessness, HIV/AIDS, wildlife conservation, inequality and bias were easily solved, they would not be our challenges. We sincerely believe that the USC Center for AI in Society provides a new direction for taking on these problems in ways that will have tangible impact in the world.

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Revised August 11, 2021